

## [William A. Cooper]

September 15th, 1939

William A. Cooper, Negro Artist.

Charlotte, N.C.

Cora L. Bennett, Writer.

Dudley W. Crawford, Reviser No Names Changed N.C. Box 7

William A. Cooper, artist and preacher gives the story of his life as follows:

“My work has been my life. Whatever degree of succes I have had has come about, I believe, as a result of my dogged determination to do something tangible for my race.

“I was born in the country near Hillsboro, N.C. As a small boy I worked on the farm. I worked in the tobacco fields, worming and stemming tobacco as well as in the cotton fields. For about four months in the winter I attended a Mission school in Hillsboro for negros. In summer time I worked as a janitor and some times as a cook or house boy.

“My father was an ordinary field hand who loved to train possum dogs. My mother had a grammar school education and at the age of fourteen taught other boys and girls how to read and write.

“When I was about fourteen I began to support myself, and soon there after went to the Industrial Institute at High Point, N.C. as a work student. I worked on the school farm, got up at five o'clock in the morning to milk the cows, plow and hoe cotton and corn, and anything else that needed to be done. While I was at this school I also took up brick laying along with my other studies.

"From High Point I went to the National Religious Training School at Durham, N.C. There I took the four year Theological Course. Still working my way through school, I received the Bachelor of Theology Degree from that institution.

"As soon as I had finished I went to Wilson, N.C. where I started out as an insurance man, and at the same time preaching at a small church on Sunday.

"I went from there to Burlington, N.C. where I was elected Principal of a high school. I also served as Principal of the high school at Graham, N.C. and taught at various other places. All this time I was studying law at night and passed the State Bar examination in 1922.

"I became interested in art for the first time a few years before this. I was in bed with a severe cold and while lying idle I thought I would try to do two pictures illustrating the Biblical quotation: 'Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, but straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be who find it.' The members of my church were quite pleased with the pictures. Their pleasure encouraged me a great deal, and from that time on I began to paint other things. It was then I started painting the members of my race, anybody I could get 3 to sit— field hands, teachers, children, cooks or washerwomen. I had taken no formal lessons at the time but I kept right on trying to see what I might do.

"I have attempted to show the real negro through art. I believe that unless we have some record of the negro that is neither burlesqued with black face nor idealized with sentimentality, the younger generation of negroes will be deprived of inspiration from their own race.

"I remember when I was painting a portrait of a little girl which I called, 'Mammy's Darling', the child of dark complexion posed contentedly until the day of her final sitting. I allowed her to come around and look at the canvas. She she saw it she said, "Oh, you're putting

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black on me'. She was angry and from that time on we were no longer friends. I like to relate this incident to show what the average negro child's attitude is along this line. The child was not responsible for her attitude. She thought of good in terms of other hues than black. She had been taught that blackness was mean and low.

"I decided then that the negro needed to be dignified in his own eyes and decided I might be able to help with this great need. There are so many phases or moods of negro life to show, I realized that even now I have just begun the task.

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"In 1931 my painting, 'The Vanishing Washerwoman' won honorable mention from the judges at the Negro Art Exhibition, sponsored in New York by the Harmon Foundation. I had a portrait of a girl, 'AKella' at the North Carolina State Fair in 1934 which took first prize. My painting 'Little Brother' must have been good as it was used as a cover page for the Methodist Church's elementary magazine. For the past two years I won the first prize at the Charlotte Museum of Arts. I also was given the sole right to represent this Museum and the State of North Carolina at the National Exhibition of American Painters in New York City.

"In recent years I was privileged to study under Mr. Clement Strudwick, of Hillsboro, N.C. my home town. I also studied under Mr. George Elliott, of Tryon, N.C. who is now dead, but who spent some time teaching and studying in Paris. I also had the criticism of Mr. Winford Conrow.

"I have been scheduled to teach art at the Charlotte Museum and also to conduct lectures for the benefit of the negro public. I taught a course at the General Church School Convention of the A.M.E. Zion Church at Cincinnati Ohio last year.

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"I have had the opportunity of studying in the Art Galleries of New York City, Chicago, Pittsburg, and Washington on various occasions, as well as in our own Museum at Charlotte.

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"I have sold a number of my paintings. I have one at Hampton Institute, Hampton, Va; one at Elizabeth City Teacher's, College, Elizabeth City, N.C. one at Shaw University, Fayetteville State Normal, Barbar-Scotia at Concord, N.C. and Winston-Salem Teacher's College. I have sold paintings to Mr. Nicholas, of Southern Pines, for his private collection; Mr. R.A. Dunn, of Charlotte; and Mr. Troy, of Baltimore. Palmer Memorial Institute purchased one of my paintings and I have done four paintings for the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Co., at Durham, N.C.

"I am now working under the division of Co-operation of Education, representing Duke University, The University of North Carolina and the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction. Under this organization we have already placed on the market, 'A Portrait of Negro Life', (1936) which had a wide and successful sale through colleges, libraries and book stores. We are now working on a text book of the high school level known as 'Builders of a Race, Portraits and Life Sketches'. This book will include one hundred outstanding negroes, representing various occupational groups, such as farmers, teachers, doctors, business men etc. Many of the portraits are already completed.

"I am particularly fond of my painting, 'The Vanishing Washerwoman', in which I tried to catch and perserve some 6 of the history of negro motherhood for the benefit of the future generation. 'My Dad' is also a favorite for very obvious reasons. 'Little Brother', 'Akella', and 'Louise' are likewise paintings of which I am very proud.

"My work with art has not kept me from carrying out my duties as a minister of the Gospel. Those religious principals were first given me by my parents and still live within me. I pastored the Clinton Chapel AM.E. Zion Church of Charlotte, four years and am now

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serving as Presiding Elder of the North Carolina District. I was honored with a Doctor of Divinity Degree from Livingston College in 1934.

"I am also a member of the North Carolina Interracial Commission and do my best to bring about a more friendly feeling and better understanding between the races. I was privileged to make a goodwill tour through North Carolina and Virginia with the Hampton Quartet visiting high schools and colleges, both negro and white. I also visited about eight summer school for negro teachers, showing my paintings and making lectures on the 'Value of Art in Human Living'.

Cooper has no children, and lives with his wife just outside the City of Charlotte. He is a tall dark man forty four years of age, and in apparently good health. His genial disposition and genuine interest in the welfare of his race<sup>7</sup> and the success of his work endows him with a magnetic personality. He is popular among the cultured and artistic people of both races.